

ROLE OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL IN THE FORMULATION OF NATIONAL POLICY

by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper divides itself into two parts. The first part will deal with the structure and functions of the National Security Council. The second part will deal with a number of issues relating to the work of the National Security Council which have to a greater or lesser degree been the subject of some public debate. It is hoped that this manner of presentation will provide the basis for meaningful panel discussion of the role of the National Security Council in the formulation of national policy. Indeed, the paper has been prepared more as a stimulant to discussion than as a definitive document.

It seems appropriate at the outset to indicate areas of possible interest which will not be considered in this paper.

First, there will be no treatment of the substantive matters which have been or are now the subject of National Security Council consideration. Were I inclined to discuss matters of substance in this paper it will be understood that I cannot do so because the security classification of National Security Council documents and the privileged character of advice given to the President of the United States would preclude such discussion.

Second, this paper will not deal with the formulation of policy at the departmental level in the Executive Branch, although the effective formulation of such policy is obviously an activity essential to normal departmental responsibilities as well as to departmental participation in National Security Council affairs.

Third, this paper will not concern itself with the evolutionary history of the National Security Council in its twelve years of existence, but only with the National Security Council as it now operates. I recognize that I have somewhat of an advantage in that there are no other discussants with current personal knowledge or experience. As some of you may know, I have been associated with the Council machinery for just over four years:

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first, as Assistant Secretary of Defense when I was a member of the Planning Board; second, as Director of the Office of Defense Mobilization, when I was a member of the Council; and since July of 1958 as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

Fourth, the paper deals only with the formulation of policy at the National Security Council level and there will therefore be no description of the implementation or execution of policy and such elements of the National Security Council structure as are concerned with this aspect of the matter. Specifically, for example, the paper will not discuss the activities of the Operations Coordinating Board.

I. FUNCTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

A. Statutory Functions and Duties of the Council

The National Security Act of 1947, as amended, establishes the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, as well as the Department of Defense. All of this was in recognition of needs exposed during World War II for unity, integration and coordination in all aspects of national security. Since 1949, the National Security Council has been a part of the Executive Office of the President.

The Preamble to the Act declares "the intent of Congress to provide a comprehensive program for the future security of the United States; to provide for the establishment of integrated policies and procedures for the departments, agencies, and functions of the Government relating to the national security . . ."

Title I of the Act, entitled "Coordination for National Security," states that the function of the Council is

"to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security."

Title I of the Act further states that the duty of the Council is

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(1) "to assess and appraise the objectives, commitments and risks of the United States in relation to our actual and potential military power, in the interest of national security, for the purpose of making recommendations to the President in connection therewith;

(2) "to consider policies on matters of common interest to the departments and agencies of the Government concerned with the national security, and to make recommendations to the President in connection therewith;"

(3) to perform "such other functions as the President may direct, for the purpose of more effectively coordinating the policies and functions of the departments and agencies of the Government relating to the national security;" and

(4) from time to time to "make such recommendations and such other reports to the President as it deems appropriate or as the President may require."

B. Concept of Council Operations

Explicit or implicit in the government statute are these basic concepts which govern the operations of the National Security Council and its machinery:

(1) to deal only with issues affecting national security;

(2) to be advisory to the President in his determination of national security policy;

(3) to seek to integrate domestic, foreign, and military policies so as to enable Government agencies to cooperate more effectively in national security matters;

(4) to assist, according to Presidential direction, in coordinating policies of Government agencies relating to the national security;

(5) to be concerned with both our actual and our potential military power.

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C. Council Structure

The National Security Council structure in the formulation of policy operates through the Council itself, including special committees and consultants, and the Council's subsidiary organizations, including the Planning Board, the National Security Council Staff, and special intelligence and internal security committees. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are the principal military advisers to the Council and the Central Intelligence Agency is its intelligence adviser.

D. Council Procedures

The Council mechanism aids the President in formulating and coordinating national security policy and is the channel through which recommendations for national security policy reach the President for his decision.

The President has determined that he will not assign an area of national security policy formulation permanently as the responsibility of a department, agency, or individual outside the NSC mechanism or make decisions on national security policy -- except in special cases or urgency -- outside the framework of the Council.

Except as directed by the President, matters to be considered by the Council in so far as possible deal with the making or alteration of broad policies -- either policies for the future or policies immediately required by currently developing events -- and with reports on the progress of carrying out approved policies. The Council does not concern itself with interagency conflicts not involving policy considerations.

As President Eisenhower has put it, the Council is a corporate body, composed of individuals advising the President in their own right rather than as representatives of their respective departments and agencies. Their function should be to seek, with their background of experience, "the most statesmanlike solution to the problems of national security, rather than to reach solutions which represent merely a compromise of departmental positions." The same concept is equally applicable to advisory and subordinate groups, such as the NSC Planning Board, although the members of the latter board are responsible also for stating the views of their respective departments and agencies.

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Attendance at Council meetings is a matter of special concern and is limited to the minimum number possible, consistent with the President's requirements and the agenda under consideration.

Occasionally, but by no means regularly, the President will convene a Council meeting with only the statutory members present, who are: The President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and the Director of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization; and the statutory advisers, that is, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of Central Intelligence; plus staff and one or two persons who have an interest in and a knowledge of the particular matter under consideration. These special meetings are convened when the matter before the Council is of a highly sensitive nature. However, normally in addition to the statutory members and advisers, there are present at Council meetings the Secretary of the Treasury; the Director of the Bureau of the Budget; and the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission.

In addition to the foregoing, the following attend: The Assistant to the President; the Director, United States Information Agency; the Under Secretary of State; the Special Assistants to the President for Foreign Economic Policy, and Science and Technology; the White House Staff Secretary; the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; the Special Assistant to the President for Security Operations Coordination; the Executive Secretary and the Deputy Executive Secretary, National Security Council. For agenda items which are the subject of official interest to them, the Attorney General and the Administrator, National Aeronautics and Space Administration are invited. Of course, for any agenda items that the President may determine, ad hoc members participate.

In order to bring to the Council deliberations a fresh, frequently-changing, non-governmental point of view and to gain public understanding of national security problems through the use of private citizens of stature, from time to time the President appoints one or more Consultants as informal advisers to the Council. This procedure is used so that no public impression arises that any such persons have been interposed between the President and his responsible Cabinet Ministers. Therefore, as a general rule, such Consultants appear at a Council meeting only to present and discuss their report.

Examples of the use of such Consultants are:

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(1) to consider and report to the Council on some proposal, either specific or general, after which the Consultant's report is reviewed by the departments and agencies concerned.

(2) to review for the Council integrated recommendations proposed by the NSC Planning Board.

In the course of the review of a recent fundamental policy paper, 23 Consultants were used. They first met with the Planning Board in groups of four or five at a time and gave their views on the existing paper up for review. Then the Planning Board devoted all or part of 27 meetings over many weeks to producing a revised paper, taking into account the comments of the Consultants and the recommendations of the responsible agencies. Subsequently, a large number of the Consultants came in again, met in a body with the Planning Board, and made further comments on the Planning Board's revised draft. In this way several of the ideas of the Consultants formed the basis for policy guidance which was ultimately incorporated into the final approved paper.

I may say that the reconstitution of the President's Science Advisory Committee and its elevation, in December 1957, from the then Office of Defense Mobilization to make it advisory directly to the President has diminished the need for National Security Council Consultants which existed in earlier years, as well as the need for certain kinds of formalized reports from Consultants.

The Council regularly meets each Thursday at 9:00 a.m. Meetings normally do not exceed two hours. Special Council meetings are called by the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs at the request of the President. The agenda for a Council meeting is determined by the President, acting through the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs.

One feature of every Council meeting is a regular briefing by the Director of Central Intelligence. He gives a summary of important developments that are occurring throughout the world, and he gives particular attention to those areas which are on the Council agenda that day.

Except in special cases of urgency, security policy recommendations by the Council to the President are based on written papers which are prepared by the Council's Planning Board in deliberations at which all essential facts are assembled and the views of all affected departments and agencies are sought, debated and integrated. The papers are of four

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general types: fundamental policy; geographical policy, on a single foreign country or on a region; and functional papers not related to a specific geographical area. These papers are then circulated and studied, in advance of the Council meeting, by those who are to attend the meeting.

After a Planning Board paper has been circulated, the JCS meet formally to discuss it and prepare written views, which are circulated to the Council in advance of the meeting. In addition, the Chairman of the JCS may elaborate orally at the Council on the military point of view. On occasions when a matter before the NSC has particular military importance, the Secretaries and the Chiefs of Staff of the three military departments are also invited to attend the Council.

E. NSC Planning Board

The NSC Planning Board membership is composed of representatives and observers, generally at the Assistant Secretary level, from the same departments and agencies which are represented at the Council. It meets regularly on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, from 2 o'clock till 5 -- or such further time as I may keep them in session. Normally, consideration of a geographical policy starts off with a study of the latest National Intelligence Estimate on the country and a briefing by the CIA adviser on the most recent developments in the area. The Planning Board normally does not send a paper forward without meeting three or four times on it. However, in crisis situations the Planning Board may have to complete a paper in one meeting; and on occasion the NSC has had to take action without referring the matter to the Planning Board at all.

Subsidiary to the Planning Board are the Planning Board Assistants, consisting of people from the same agencies which are represented at the Planning Board, but at the next subordinate level. After the Planning Board has discussed a paper, it is usually turned over to the Board Assistants to be redrafted. Normally the Board Assistants meet four to eight hours on a paper before sending a redraft back to the Planning Board.

F. Officers of the Council

The President is Chairman of the National Security Council and presides at each Council meeting which he attends. (Since I have been Special Assistant, there have been forty-five meetings of the NSC and the President has presided at forty-three of them.) The Special Assistant for National Security Affairs is the principal supervisory officer of the

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National Security Council and serves as Chairman of the Council's Planning Board. The President looks to the Special Assistant at Council meetings to present the items upon the Agenda, to brief the Council on their background, to explain any "splits" and to initiate discussion. Views are sought around the table so as to bring out relevant facts and opinions and so as to give those present an opportunity to participate in making policy which they must later carry out. The Presidential decision may be announced at the meeting, or on further consideration of the recommendations made to him at such a meeting.

There is an Executive Secretary (provided by statute) and a Deputy Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, appointed by the President. Under the supervision of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, the Executive Secretary is the head of the NSC Staff, acts for the Special Assistant in his absence (including acting as Chairman of the Planning Board), and advises and aids him in the performance of his duties.

The principal duties of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs include: responsibility for agenda, and presentation of material for discussion at Council meetings; as necessary, briefing the President before Council meetings on agenda items; determining, in collaboration with the NSC Executive Secretary, the agenda and scheduling of work for Planning Board meetings; presiding at, and participating in, Planning Board meetings; supervising the work of the NSC Staff through the Executive Secretary; attending and participating in meetings of the Operations Coordinating Board, the Council on Foreign Economic Policy and other relevant groups; attending as an observer at meetings of the Cabinet; and such other assignments related to national security affairs as the President may direct.

II. SOME ISSUES WHICH HAVE BEEN THE SUBJECT OF PUBLIC DEBATE

With this brief description of the structure and functions of the Council, I now turn to some of the issues which have been the subject of public discussion to which some members of the Panel have contributed.

A. It has been said that use of the NSC for policy formulation under President Eisenhower has tended to cut off cross-fertilization of ideas between departments and that cross-contact between the personnel of different departments has been avoided. It is said that Departmental staffs do

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not exchange information with each other, but rather tend to save their best "ammunition" for use before the Council.

Such statements are based on misinformation as the Council mechanism currently operates. I know of a large number of meetings, both formal and informal, which take place between, for example, representatives of the State and Defense Departments from the Secretary level on down. In fact, such direct liaison between departments is actively encouraged as providing a firm foundation for policy formulation. Frequently the Council or the Planning Board will refer a problem to the interested departments for joint study and report.

As far as the Planning Board is concerned, I can assure you that no departmental representative is reticent in marshaling the arguments in support of any position he sees fit to take. Moreover, it is the established practice for Planning Board members to bring experts from their own staffs. For example, when a paper on a foreign country is being discussed, the State Department will bring the area people concerned and the Defense Department may bring the people who deal with the Military Assistance Programs.

It is seldom that arguments are made in the Council -- except by the President or Vice President -- which have not been previously discussed in the Planning Board; although I will say that Council members do not always fully espouse the position taken by their Planning Board representatives and are sometimes persuaded by their own wisdom or by the persuasiveness of others to a different view.

B. It has been said that the NSC is a Committee and suffers from the vice of the committee system.

If the purpose of that criticism is to argue against the use of committees in Government, I can only point out that the functioning of Government involves the responsibility and knowledge of a number of departments which can be more effectively integrated through committee meetings than by a series of separate consultations.

However, in so far as the NSC is concerned, the statement is misleading because it suggests that the NSC is no more than a high-level interdepartmental committee. The NSC is more than an interdepartmental committee because, first of all, its chairman is the President. As indicated

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earlier, President Eisenhower expects the members of the NSC to confront problems broadly -- just as he must -- and not narrowly from the sole point of view of departmental responsibility. On occasion the President has specifically asked the members of the Council for advice to him which would represent their own best personal judgment, rather than simply the advice which may have been derived from departmental staff analysis.

C. It has been stated that the NSC is able to handle the continuation and development of established policies, but has failed in the task of initiating new policies.

I cannot agree with such a statement. Since I have been in my present position, the Council has initiated a number of new policies on diverse subjects. As the technology of weapons systems has changed, as new nations have come into being and as the pattern of world events has shifted, the Council has sought to keep ahead of events by developing new policies. While I cannot go into substance, I will say, for example, that NSC interest in outer space antedated SPUTNIK.

Before the end of President Eisenhower's first administration, virtually every policy of the previous administration had been reviewed and revised by the new members of the Council, in some cases by developing substantially new policies. Since that time, most of the policy statements approved by the President during his first term have undergone at least one revision and, in many cases, more than two.

D. It has been said that the members of the Council are not free agents but are the instructed ambassadors of their respective departments.

While it is both true and desirable that a Council member comes to meetings with a clear idea of the particular interest and the background of experience of his own department in a given policy position, nevertheless no sophisticated observer can really believe that the Secretary of State can be "instructed" by any subordinate in his department. Very often a Council member, convinced of the wisdom of the advice given him by his own departmental staff, will argue vigorously in the Council for the departmental view. Equally often, having heard the views of other

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members of the Council, he will depart in some measure from his original position in favor of a view which represents the national, rather than the departmental, interest.

E. It has been said that while there have been many split recommendations on minor issues, few alternative proposals on basic policy have been advanced.

It is true that despite the best efforts of the Chairman of the Planning Board, policy papers go to the Council from time to time with split recommendations on minor issues. It is not true that major splits are not generally reflected in such papers. In fact, more than half the policy statements which are sent to the Council from the Planning Board contain split views largely on important issues on which one or more of the NSC agencies have indicated a strong divergence of opinion. A recent paper dealing with a fundamental policy contained 19 splits when it was sent to the Council from the Planning Board, and required 5 successive Council meetings before final approval.

Additionally, on many occasions the Planning Board will present to the Council, without recommendations, a special discussion paper consisting of a series of seemingly feasible alternatives, with the pros and cons of each carefully set forth. The Council will discuss the alternatives and thereby provide guidance to the Planning Board as a basis for developing a draft policy statement.

Moreover, through the use of Consultants and continuing study of policy suggestions put forward by Congress, the press, educational institutions and in letters, the NSC machinery gives frequent consideration to many alternative policy proposals originating outside Government.

F. It has been said that an air of diplomatic politeness permeates generally the deliberations of the NSC and that members hesitate to antagonize each other by speaking their minds freely in criticism of their colleagues' policies.

It is true that the members of the Council observe the ordinary decencies of civilized discussion. But would anyone suppose that a Council, composed of such men as Charles E. Wilson, Arthur Radford,

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George Humphrey, Harold Stassen, Arthur Flemming and John Foster Dulles -- to mention past members only -- would conduct their affairs with such extreme politeness as to conceal their real differences of view? On the contrary, so freely do many members speak their minds that on occasion vigorous discussion has been brought to an end only when the President or the Special Assistant introduces a light touch.

G. It has been said that a strong agency whose Chief has the ear of the President has a much better chance to get what he wants by bringing a policy recommendation directly to the President, rather than having it "processed out of recognition" by the machinery of the NSC.

It goes without saying that any member of the Cabinet has the right to bring his problems directly to the President, and there are, of course, some decisions which the President makes by dealing with one Cabinet member alone. I do not believe, however, that in most instances involving national security policies of interest to more than one government agency, the agency head really has a much better chance "to get what he wants" by going directly to the President. Midnight decisions obtained in this manner often have a way of becoming "unstuck." Moreover, President Eisenhower has made it a practice not to determine, on the unilateral recommendation of one department head, national security matters which are clearly of interest to more than one responsible department.

H. A proposal for improving the National Security Council structure which has frequently been advanced is the creation of a large super-staff. Sometimes this proposal has taken the form of a recommendation that the existing NSC Staff be broadened in size and functions. At other times, the proposal has been that there be created an entirely new body, a Presidential Staff for National Security Matters.

There is room for a wide diversity of opinion about such a proposal. I happen to believe firmly that those who are charged with day-to-day operations in the various departments and agencies are the persons best qualified to assist in the formulation of national security policies which they will ultimately be asked to carry out. In this way, each interested department and agency shares in formulating the recommendations which go to the Council, has full opportunity to be heard at the Planning Board and Council levels, and has the right to express any disagreement which it may have with the proposed recommendations.

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A large super-staff, once established, is likely to settle into a relatively fixed pattern of advocating particular policy approaches or pet projects, thereby becoming just another participating agency. Moreover, I do not believe that the American people would approve or be best served by experimentation with ivory tower policy proposals when they involve the security or even the survival of our nation.

Also it should be pointed out that the present NSC Staff does perform the function of a national staff by individual, objective analysis of every policy paper that goes through the Planning Board to the Council. Although the NSC Staff does not itself make policy recommendations, it does scrutinize departmental proposals and suggest policy alternatives or additions that merit consideration.

The NSC Staff has always been and continues to be small. One reason for this is that the resources of the departments and agencies, including their operating personnel, are always available to and are constantly used by the Planning Board. Such operating personnel frequently attend and participate in meetings of the Planning Board in which matters within their competence are under consideration. This procedure has made it unnecessary to have a larger, independent staff for the Council.

I. It has been said that Consultants are too far removed from Executive Branch responsibility; that they are out of touch with the real problems with which Executive Branch officials must deal; and that therefore they are not competent to make policy recommendations to the President and to the Council.

In response I can only say that such a view supports the position that policy should be formulated within the government by those who are responsible for day-to-day operations in the various departments and agencies. By the same token, the position that the Consultants are too far removed from operations would also argue against the proposal for a high-level Presidential super-staff.

J. It has been said that Council members are too busy with their manifold departmental responsibilities, their pressing social schedules and their necessary travel abroad to engage in detailed national security policy planning.

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In response, I would like to say that the heavy responsibility of the Council members is one of the reasons for the organization of the National Security Council mechanism as it is now constituted. It is the duty of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, working in conjunction with the Planning Board, the NSC Staff, the Board Assistants and experts from the interested departments as required, to shape policy proposals and to identify issues so that the President and the National Security Council can, by taking about two hours time from their other pressing obligations on Thursday morning every week, reach informed decisions upon broad national security policy. The Council itself does not and should not engage in detailed planning.

CONCLUSION

Let me make it clear that I would never contend that the Council and its machinery are perfect. Indeed, I do not believe that it is possible to have a mechanism which would be free from imperfection in a democratic society and with a republican form of government.

One of the values of the Council and its functioning, to my mind, is that policy decisions taken in this mechanism are fully understood by the heads of the departments primarily concerned; the policy is recorded; and, perhaps as important as either of the foregoing, by reason of participation the department heads find themselves with the kind of a commitment to the policy decision which is not always certain when decisions are unilaterally taken with others.

I believe that the policies of this Administration have been sound. However, in a free society there is room and opportunity for disagreement. If I were to be thoroughly candid, I would have to say that I suspect that the unhappiness of any knowledgeable person with respect to the NSC and its procedures really derives, not from a concern about how the machinery works, but what it produces. This, then, is substantive disagreement. For those, the only solution would seem to be to elect a different President. In any event, any President is going to shape and use the machinery in his own way so as to assist him in making the ultimate decisions; for that is where the responsibility inescapably lies.

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